DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 319 211 EC 231 101

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TITLE The Regular Education Initiative (REI): Where Do Students with Learning Disabilities Fit?
PUB DATE 21 Oct 89
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Connecticut Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (19th, South Norwalk, CT, October 21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Principles; Elementary Secondary Education; *Learning Disabilities; *Mainstreaming; *Position Papers; *Professional Associations; *Regular and Special Education Relationship; Teacher Associations

ABSTRACT

The paper defines the Regular Education Initiative (REI) and outlines its fundamental assumptions. The paper then discusses the responses of three organizations to the assumptions, as delineated in the joint policy statement of the National Education Association, the Council for Exceptional Children, and the American Association of School Administrators. The assumptions include: students are more alike than different; all good teachers use the same basic techniques and strategies; pull-out programs should be eliminated; the separation of special education and regular education programs results in inefficiency, duplication, and fragmentation; labeling is unnecessary and stigmatizes students; and physically separate education is discriminatory and unequal. The responses refute each of these assumptions and argue against the effectiveness of the REI in meeting the needs of special students. A 16-item bibliography is appended. (JDD)

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THE REGULAR EDUCATION INITIATIVE (REI)
WHERE DO STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES FIT?

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Presented to: Learning Disabilities Through the Lifespan, 19th Annual Conference of the Connecticut Association for Children with Learning Disabilities
October 21, 1989

I. WHAT IS THE REI?

In November 1986, Madeleine Will, then Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services for the U.S. Department of Education released a report entitled "Educating Students with Learning Problems - a Shared Responsibility" (Will, 1986). The report proposed fundamental changes in the service delivery system for students with "milder" disabilities. It objected to the pull-out method of service delivery and suggested that these children should be placed back in regular education classrooms. This proposal and the philosophies it launched have been referred to as the "Regular Education Initiative (REI)."

II. WHAT IS THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE ?

In May 1987 the National Education Association (NEA), the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) developed a joint policy statement which addressed some of the fundamental assumptions of the REI. I would like to delineate these "assumptions" and discuss the joint statement's responses to them.

1. Students are more alike than different.

While superficially that assumption might be true, learning is a very complex task. We know that not all children learn in the same way. We also know that the provision of special education programs within the public schools has made regular education accessible to many students who had previously failed in the "mainstream" because of their incompatible learning styles. Our joint policy statement declares that one of the real strengths of our educational system is its diversity.

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2. Good teachers can teach all students; all good teachers use the same basic techniques and strategies.

Our joint policy statement points out that while some children with disabilities can benefit from the instruction provided in a regular education class, many children with disabilities are not able to benefit from some or all of this instruction because of their unique learning styles or because they require a differentiated curriculum. It also asserts that special educators are the educational professionals qualified to provide specially designed instruction to children with disabilities.

Regular educators can work with wide instructional diversity effectively only if the regular education class size is limited. At the present class sizes of 20, 25 or more, teachers have to choose to either teach to the middle or concentrate resources on the students at the lower instructional level. Ability grouping within a classroom does allow the teacher to individualize, however, because of the amount of time it requires, it limits the amount of subject matter that can be presented within the constraints of a school day.

3. Pull-out programs should be eliminated.

Our joint policy reaffirms the original intent of PL94-142:
- that decisions about the appropriate education for a student with disabilities must be individually determined,
- that procedures must protect the rights of the child and educators,
- that parents, regular educators and special educators must be actively involved in the process,
- that students should be educated within the least restrictive environment as individually determined,
- that each child must be assured access to a full continuum of quality special education alternatives. The elimination of pull-out types of program alternatives would limit and in effect deny a student's access to a full continuum of services.

4. The separation of special education and regular education programs results in inefficiency, duplication and fragmentation.

Proponents of the REI have called for the combination of all regular, special education and compensatory education (e.g., Chapter I, Bilingual) budgets. While the prospect of combining the administration and funding of all programs may look attractive to some school administrators and Boards of Education, the consequence where it has been tried has been decreased funding for programs for students with disabilities and students-at-risk.

Our joint policy states that the critical components for ensuring quality education for students with disabilities are:

- adequate supply of qualified special education and related services personnel,
- appropriate conditions and classroom facilities in which to work,
- sufficient instructional resources and materials,
- adequate local, state and federal funding.

We have called on the federal government to increase, not decrease, its financial obligations to support special education services.

We recognize the need for more coordinated programming for students. The joint policy also encourages inservice programs for regular educators to increase their knowledge of diverse learning styles and to enhance their understanding of students with disabilities so they can participate fully as collaborative team members.

5. Labeling is unnecessary and stigmatizes students.

The effects of stigma associated with special education has been overestimated. Some studies have suggested that students feel more stigmatized if they are given extra help in their regular education classes than if they are pulled out to a separate class (Jenkins & Heinen, 1989).

Classification should only be done in order to access special education programming. Sensitivity on the part of administrators and educators will help to limit stigmatizing by ensuring that special education programs are not labeled with classification terminology (e.g., LD class, EMR class).

An equally distressing concern is the placement of students into self-contained classrooms based on their "classification" rather than their identified individual needs. Both CEA and NEA maintain that decisions about placement must be individually determined by the PPT, not by administrative directives ordering students with a particular classification into a given class.

6. Physically separate education is discriminatory and unequal.

The NEA Caucus for Educators of Exceptional Children has developed a policy which speaks to the implication that separate special education programs are discriminatory. The essential factor to remember regarding special education placement is that these decisions are based on the fact that the student requires a separate program in order to have an equal opportunity to learn. The process protects students rights to an appropriate education.

In my role as Chairperson of the Connecticut Education Association Special Education Caucus, I hear from a number of regular and special education teachers in Connecticut. I would like to share with you some of their concerns:

- With the introduction of the REI in Connecticut, more students with apparent learning difficulties are remaining in regular education classes and are being provided with minimal "consultation" services from special education specialists.

- Special education teachers and specialists are being asked to maintain their present class/caseload sizes plus serve as a consultants to numerous other students in the regular education classes.

- Special education teachers and regular education teachers are not being provided with additional time in their schedules to consult with one another.

- In some districts, teachers are being discouraged from making special education referrals.

- In some districts, PPT's are discouraged from recommending outside placements due to the cost. Their suggestions are reviewed by an administrator and the administrator, not the PPT, makes the decision.

- Class sizes for both regular education classes and special education classes/caseloads are increasing in many parts of the state due to budgetary cuts in personnel.

- There are no special education class size/caseload maximums in Connecticut to protect students from being placed in overcrowded programs.

- The "mainstreaming" component of the IEP is not clearly defined and is frequently left to the "discretion" of the special education teacher. This leaves the special education teacher in the position of negotiating with the building administrator about which class or environment is deemed appropriate for both academic and/or social integration purposes. The decision-making is taken out of the hands of the PPT.

I raise these issues today because I view them as interconnected with the REI. There are some educators and some school districts in Connecticut that have implemented REI components using the "Consultation Model." I submit that to be successful the following conditions must be present:

- The program must be determined as appropriate for each student on an individual basis.
- The special education teacher must serve only as a consultant and not as a direct service provider for some students and a consultant for others.
- The special education teacher must have the skills to provide consultation services.
- The regular education class size must be small (15 or less).
- The regular education teacher must be provided with ample time to consult with the special education teacher and to develop differentiated curriculum materials.
- The regular education teacher must be provided with inservicing.
- The expectations of the student must be clearly defined.

The REI can be used by those who wish to solve their local budget problems. If this occurs students will not have access to a full continuum of services, special education teachers and specialists will be fragmented, regular education teachers will be frustrated and the quality of education provided to students with disabilities will suffer.

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